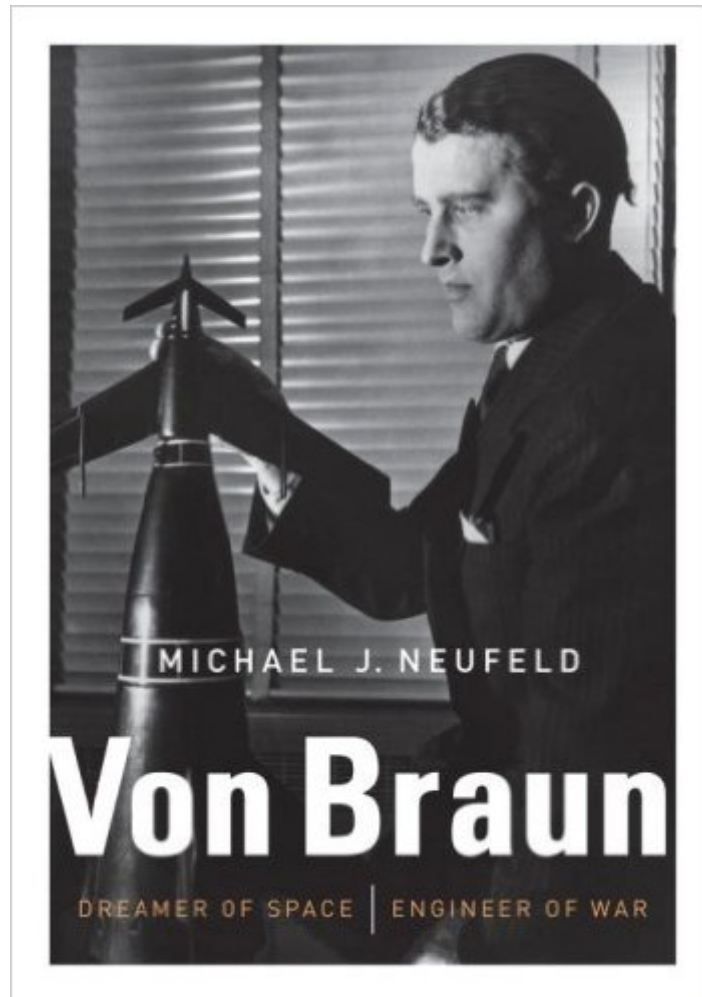


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Von Braun: Dreamer Of Space, Engineer Of War



Synopsis

The first authoritative biography of Wernher von Braun, chief rocket engineer of the Third Reich "creator of the infamous V-2 rocket" who became one of the fathers of the U.S. space program. In this meticulously researched and vividly written life, Michael J. Neufeld gives us a man of profound moral complexities, glorified as a visionary and vilified as a war criminal, a man whose brilliance and charisma were coupled with an enormous and, some would say, blinding ambition. As one of the leading developers of rocket technology for the German army, von Braun yielded to pressure to join the Nazi Party in 1937 and reluctantly became an SS officer in 1940. During the war, he supervised work on the V-2s, which were assembled by starving slave laborers in a secret underground plant and then fired against London and Antwerp. Thousands of prisoners died "a fact he well knew and kept silent about for as long as possible. When the Allies overran Germany, von Braun and his team surrendered to the Americans. The U.S. Army immediately recognized his skills and brought him and his colleagues to America to work on the development of guided missiles, in a covert operation that became known as Project Paperclip. He helped launch the first American satellite in 1958 and headed NASA's launch-vehicle development for the Apollo Moon landing. Handsome and likable, von Braun dedicated himself to selling the American public on interplanetary travel and became a household name in the 1950s, appearing on Disney TV shows and writing for popular magazines. But he never fully escaped his past, and in later years he faced increasing questions as his wartime actions slowly came to light. Based on new sources, Von Braun is a brilliantly nuanced portrait of a man caught between morality and progress, between his dreams of the heavens and the earthbound realities of his life.

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Customer Reviews

The career of Wernher von Braun has been a subject of investigation, and not a little controversy, almost from the time that the German rocketeer came to the United States after World War II. There is no question in my mind that "Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War" will be recognized as a seminal addition to the literature of space history and biography. In this book Michael J. Neufeld, the chair of the Division of Space History at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum and a longtime friend and colleague of mine (so I confess that I am not totally unbiased in my assessment), traces the career of one of the most important rocket developers and champions of space exploration during the period between the 1930s and the 1970s. He went on to a stellar career (pun intended) in rocketry and spaceflight. Neufeld argues that von Braun should be remembered for four major accomplishments:(1) Developing the world's first ballistic missile, the V-2, for Germany during World War II.(2) Popularizing space exploration in the U.S. in the 1950s through a succession of articles, speeches, public appearances, and television broadcasts. The most important of these were the famed "Collier's" series of articles and the three Disney TV programs.(3) Launching the first U.S. satellite to orbit the Earth, Explorer 1, in January 1958, a significant rejoinder to the Sputnik launches of the fall of 1957.(4) Leading the technical development of the largest successful rocket ever built, the Saturn V launcher that took the Apollo astronauts to the Moon in the 1960s and 1970s.

A mob followed Dr. Wernher von Braun into the armored test chamber of the M. I. T. Rocket Research Society some time in 1962. We shook hands, and he picked up a static test rocket motor we had made for liquid propellants with an innovative plug nozzle. He said, having missed the words "static test": "You got to get some of ze meat off here, here and here!", pointing. He was one of those rare people with an aura that just radiated -- highly charismatic in manner. Then I understood how engineers and others could work for him in the foul conditions at Peenemünde that prevailed after the bombing of 17 Aug 43 (p153). And at Nordhausen. Anyhow, the RRS visit was followed by a talk on Saturn booster development in M. I. T.'s Kresge Auditorium, which would have impressed any U. S. congresspeople who saw it. But neither author Neufeld nor I have any illusions about the V-2 program. As was quoted several times from Mort Sahl imitating von Braun: "Ve shoot for ze moon, but zometimes ve hit London." So Neufeld does not indulge in hero worship. Neufeld's

exhaustive research, backed up by 120 pages of notes, uses letters sent by von Braun, other letters, interviews with relatives, and any other imaginable sources, has helped produce what must be the definitive biography of von Braun. Good index. Two groups of black & white photos are provided. And it is a biography, contrary to another reviewer, who called this book a history of rocketry, which it certainly is not. The author stated he was able to read German, which surely helped. So von Braun's ancestors, schooling, early work in the German Society for Space Travel, movement to work for the Wehrmacht before Hitler was in power, and remaining afterwards is all there.

This is likely to be the authoritative book on the life of Wernher von Braun. Neufeld has clearly done his homework. At the same time, some readers might be disappointed at the scope of the book, and his handling of von Braun's Nazi past is certain to be controversial. The book is certainly true to its title. This is the story of Wernher von Braun, and Neufeld stays tightly focused on his subject. Wernher von Braun led a fascinating life. Born to aristocracy, he dreamed of going to space from an early age, and became an early pioneer of the rocket industry. During World War II he became head of one of Germany's most sophisticated weapons programs, eventually developing the V-2 rocket. At the end of World War II, von Braun and other German scientist were brought to the United States, where he became head of one of the United States' first space programs. Eventually he would play a leading role in launching the first US satellite, and in the Apollo lunar missions. Throughout, von Braun is a larger than life personality: appearing on TV and in movies; writing popular fiction and magazine articles; meeting with heads of state and celebrities; jetting to exotic locations; flying, big game hunting, and scuba diving. The relentless focus on von Braun might be too much for some readers, and at times the book seems to be an endless parade of dates and facts. While well written, and easy to follow, it is inevitably tedious. While we are treated to a detailed account of von Braun's family tree there is little on the history of rocketry before von Braun. Even though von Braun's life was largely shaped by World War II and the Cold War, there is little background on these events.

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